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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to investigate the role of the community college in the lives of students and staff, and to examine the relationship between organizational structure and institutional culture. The study methodology involved in-depth interviews, questionnaire surveys, and observations at one State University of New York community college, and additional interviews at other sites to test the generalizability of the single-campus data. Study findings included the following: (1) the student profile changed dramatically during the past 20 years, with trends toward increasing proportions of women, older students, and middle-class students; (2) the community college was the first educational choice of the majority of respondents, whose reasons for attending included accessibility, affordability, and the benefits associated with going to a "well respected" college; (3) students' major criticisms concerned the lack of social and cultural opportunities at the college; (4) comparatively small classes, rewards for effective teaching, an emphasis on student evaluations, and a folklore concerning student/teacher relationships reinforced positive student perceptions of the college; (5) faculty and staff identified strongly with the college and with the idea of service to the students and community; and (6) major sources of job satisfaction among faculty and staff were classroom experiences, interactions with students, opportunities for mentoring, and supportive relationships with colleagues. Literature on organizational culture and the community college's social role is cited throughout the report, and a 140-item bibliography is included. (AYC)

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CULTURE AND FORM:
SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

by

Donna Marie Fish

Working Paper Series
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We are happy to publish this summary of the results of her dissertation. Copies of this publication can be obtained from the ERIC system.

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CULTURE AND FORM:

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Being the Summary Chapter of a Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School

of Cornell University

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

by

Donna Marie Fish

January 1988

Chapter VI

Conclusions

> No doubt there are few positions in life that do not throw together some persons who are there by virtue of failure and other persons who are there by virtue of success. In this sense, the dead are sorted but not segregated, and continue to walk among the living.
>
> Erving Goffman
> "On Cooling the Mark Out: Some Aspects of Adaptation to Failure"

> All social movements involve conflicts which are reflected intellectually in controversies. It would not be a sign of health if such an important social interest as education were not also an arena of struggle, practical and theoretical.
>
> John Dewey
> Experience and Education

Introduction

The American system of higher education has been the scene of tremendous growth throughout the course of the twentieth century. Two-year, junior and community colleges have played a major role in this expansion both in the numbers of institutions and in the number and types of individuals served. Today 53 percent of first-time college freshman, both full and part-time, are enrolled at community colleges (Karabel 1986:19). Yet despite impressive figures documenting the community college's prominent role in higher education today, it still

remains an enigma, shrouded by sparse but disparate accounts, often lacking in objectivity and understanding.

Since the publication of Burton Clark's (1960b) seminal piece, The Open Door College, nearly three decades have passed. It is astonishing that the community college has received comparatively little attention from social scientists and even less from specialists who study organizational behavior during this period. The 1970s saw a number of writings critical of the community college emerge from the university community but the majority of them were characterized by a decidedly "outsider" perspective (Oromaner 1983). When viewed beside the informative but often uncritical (or sometimes worse yet, self-congratulatory) literature coming from the proponents of the community college, one had to wonder whether it was even the same institution that was being discussed.

It is my contention that the literature on community colleges assumed this unfortunate and often times unproductive bifurcation due to the lack of early and continuous efforts to approach the community college on its own terms. Social scientists have long heralded Weber's admonition to approach verstehen by first establishing the value relevance of the selection of a problem and then by adopting value-neutrality in method and interpretation. This approach has, of necessity, served to structure inquiries in "foreign" cultures, yet students of the community college have rarely adopted the questions or methods appropriate to laying a broad-based foundation of understanding upon which subsequent inquiries might build.

Instead, Clark's (1960a; 1960b) description of San Jose Junior College has often served as the cornerstone for more recent inquiries

without being subjected to what Clark himself describes as "the same cold, steady eye on this sector of activity [higher education] as [one] would use in the study of politics or the economy, the social-class system or the cultures of others" (1984:5). Essentially, the majority of subsequent inquiries, small in number as they are, have failed to ask the question, How do the participants in the community college define their experience? Too often, a four-year, liberal arts framework has informed the questions, data collection and interpretive understanding assigned to studies of the community college.

The purpose of the present study, then, was threefold: (1) to take a step away from the existing literature on the community college and, through use of an ethnographic approach,to work toward an understanding of the role the community college plays in the lives of its participants; (2) to develop an integrative account of the complex and dynamic relationships between the organizational structure and culture of the community college; and (3) to serve as an in-depth exploratory study of one college, placed in its state-system context, with additional comparative work at other colleges to discover the validity of generalizations within this system and to serve as the foundation for subsequent, detailed inquiries.

The Scope and Limitations of this Study

This study was designed to obtain an in-depth view of the role of one State University of New York community college in the lives of its participants. Although it was not possible to achieve this same depth of understanding of a truly representative sample of SUNY's 30 community colleges, additional interviews at other sites served to

support the validity and generalizability of the findings reported here. Comparative field work and interviews at four other Upstate community colleges, each varying in age, size and proximity to four-year colleges, was necessarily of a shorter duration than the year-long observations at U.C.C. but nonetheless added significant breadth to this inquiry.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, there is a great deal of variation in the goals and structure of community colleges across state systems, and oftentimes even within a state, individual colleges will take on distinctive "institutional personalities" (Aldridge 1968). Unfortunately these differences have received very little attention and gross generalizations about all two- year colleges have resulted. Therefore, the results of this study should be viewed within their Upstate New York context (Upstate herein referring to colleges outside of New York City (CUNY) and Long Island).

Upstate Community College was selected to serve as a contrasting case against previous studies (in particular, those of Clark (1960b) and London (1978)) which were concerned with newly formed junior and community colleges. As one of the oldest community colleges in the state, it has a rich history which undoubtedly has had a marked impact upon the culture that has evolved. Just as the newness of San Jose Junior College and City Community College offered Clark and London data concerning interesting organizational dynamics, so too has the history of organizational transformations at U.C.C. offered yet another perspective on the emergence of the community college.

Although every attempt was made to include part-time day and evening students and adjunct faculty in the sample of interviews, the

study as a whole probably contains a bias toward full-time faculty and, to a lesser extent, full-time day students. Because of their limited presence on campus, adjunct faculty were particularly difficult to observe in non-classroom settings and to interview. Similarly, part-time day and evening students are much less visible than those students who do not have work and family responsibilities and are therefore more likely to study on campus and to be involved in more activities. Both adjunct faculty and part-time and evening students were included in the sample of in-depth interviews. However, to the extent that they were less often a focus of the observations made outside the classroom and interview settings, there is an inherent neglect of this important constituency.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The field of organizational behavior has been dominated by two metaphors for a major portion of its existence: (1) organization as machine and (2) organization as organism. The limitations of these perspectives for developing an understanding of modern complex organizational settings have been most keenly felt in their inherent neglect of the shared meanings which groups within organizations and sometimes whole organizations share.

Given their comparative absence from most other bodies of literature, it is not surprising to find that the community college is virtually absent from organizational behavior studies. It is particularly notable, however, that the comparatively new breed of researchers who are concerned with the development of culture as a paradigm for understanding organizations has likewise most often chosen

corporate rather than other types of organizations as their arena of inquiry.

The present study sought to use a cultural perspective to examine the ecological context of the community college and its participants and the patterns of interaction which characterize these members. Likewise, the meanings and interpretations which they share and the manner by which patterns of culture are enacted and transmitted was of central concern.

The exploratory nature of this study, coupled with its goals, called for a methodology which would provide an extended opportunity to uncover the structural and cultural relationships which characterize Upstate Community College. An ethnographic approach was selected as the most appropriate method by which a foundation of understanding could be achieved. As mentioned in Chapter One, many studies of the community college have been built upon assumptions which are at best, untested and at worst, elitist. In an attempt to let the perspectives of the actors under consideration guide the course of the study, explicit hypotheses were not formed in advance. Instead, the formulation of the survey questionnaires, gathering of "artifacts", and the structuring of observations arose from a continually evolving understanding of the exigencies of the college and its participants.

Results

Since its establishment in 1946, the college that is now known as Upstate Community College has undergone a series of transformations in response to local and more broad-based environmental pressures. During and after World War II the demand for technicians in local industries

rose steadily. This trend was followed in the 1960s by a series of changes in the curriculum to accommodate the growing demand for university parallel programs as rising credentialism began to shape educational expectations.

Curriculum, site and name changes came relatively rapidly as the student population grew from 215 credit- course enrollees in the fall of 1946 to 1,610 in 1960, 4,192 in 1970, 6,267 in 1980 and 7,132 in 1983, the year of this study.

One of the major premises of Burton Clark's (1960b) now classic essay on the junior college was that two fundamentally conflicting forces exist within contemporary society. On the one hand, many people in a democratic society espouse the belief that social status and mobility are rewards which are available to all who possess the motivation to work hard and make the necessary sacrifices to succeed. On the other hand, there are structural limitations on the numbers who may enjoy social mobility, thereby opening up the likelihood that a certain portion will be frustrated in their efforts. Clark maintains that the community/junior college has served to accommodate the entrance of growing numbers who aspire to get ahead through higher education while at the same time setting up mechanisms to redirect their efforts. The so-called "cooling-out" process involves offering alternative, more readily attainable goals, encouraging gradual disengagement from previous goals, providing the student with the necessary evidence to support the need for an alternate plan, and consoling the student by stressing the value of alternative options. Although the focus of this study was not on testing the validity of the

"cooling-out function" of the community college, the results do provide further insight into this area.

Students

As with community colleges across the nation, the profile of Upstate Community College's students, as well as that of the other colleges surveyed, has changed dramatically in the course of the last two decades. As the numbers from the baby-boom generation swelled the size of the campuses, the faces of those who were attending changed also. Women came to represent more than half of the full-time students and an even higher percentage of the part-time students. The average age of both male and female students climbed as well, but part-time female students in particular served to skew the average higher.

Likewise the socioeconomic and educational background of students at U.C.C. has come to reflect the increasing middle-class component which community colleges across the nation have reported, as the availability of financial aid has shrunk. In fact, U.C.C. students surpass their national two-year and four-year public college peers on estimates of combined parental income as well as on father's highest level of education. Their strong academic backgrounds prior to coming to U.C.C. are similarly high when compared with two-year and four-year college averages.

The most logical explanation for these findings centers on the composition of area employment opportunities. The major employer in the area is a "high-tech" multinational corporation which employs a fair portion of the parents of U.C.C. students and it is likely that the average education and income of fathers in this sample is raised as

a result. Similarly, the host city for U.C.C. is a "university town", a factor which usually has an impact on the average educational level of residents. However, the in-depth random surveys did not reveal a large population of sons and daughters of university professionals, making this explanation less tenable. It is possible, though, that the high school backgrounds of those students who did choose U.C.C. reflect the generally higher achievement of students as a whole in high schools located in university towns.

For the vast majority of students at all four field sites, the community college was their first-choice college. Their major reasons for attending a community college centered around their perceptions of accessibility, affordability and the benefits associated with attending a "well respected" college. They displayed a strong belief in the American creed which holds that education is the key ingredient in personal advancement and that education, at any level, is something to be revered.

That is not to say that the students were without criticisms of the community college. Their major criticism centered around the lack of social and cultural opportunities at the college. Ironically, students overwhelmingly supported the commuter nature of the college, presumably, though, because of its connection to lower costs. Recognizing that personal factors often took them away from campus, some students still felt that community colleges do not engender as much school loyalty or spirit as four-year schools.

Several factors contribute to this view. Many community colleges report difficulties in getting a large proportion of their students involved. Student activity fees are kept low or are not charged at all

in order to keep student costs down. Designing activities which will appeal to the broad range of students served by the community college is likewise difficult, especially when one considers that half of the student population is part-time. Recent changes in the state's drinking age have introduced a further concern over liability issues. When these factors are added to employment, relationship and family responsibilities, as well as an overcrowded physical plant, it is surprising to find the level of involvement which does exist at U.C.C. and other community colleges.

Warming Up and Cooling Out

The interaction between individual psychosocial and organizational characteristics is probably even more sharply displayed in the community college than in other educational institutions. Many students come to the community college with an essentially "local" orientation; that is, they generally do not see the value of "going away" to college as producing benefits which outweigh the costs associated with attending a more cosmopolitan college. They do appear to recognize that theirs is a qualitatively different life experience due to socioeconomic, educational, and lifestyle differences between themselves and a hypothetical "elite", yet they seemed generally unwilling to rate their community college experience as "second best" compared to what the average student experiences at a state college or non-elite private university.

For many students, especially the mature students and those who develop close relationships with members of the faculty or staff, the community college represents a place where their direction in life and

sense of self has emerged. These students are quite vociferous in their defense of the community college and in praise of the role their experience has played in raising their self-confidence and in confirming or raising their aspirations.

A variety of structural and cultural factors serve to reinforce this vision and experience. Upstate Community College and the other community colleges in this study are essentially defined as teaching colleges with strong faculty support for the importance of effective teaching and for working closely with individual students. Rather than feeling that they are "bothering" a faculty member or taking him or her away from research or other responsibilities, students take pride in being the next protege of a faculty member who speaks of past student success stories. Comparatively small classes, rewards for effective teaching, an emphasis on student evaluations, and a historical folklore surrounding faculty and student relationships all serve to perpetuate this view of the community college.

But what of the more sedate students, those individuals for whom the community college experience is possibly less than personalized or less than uplifting? A body of studies critical of the community college would suggest that these students far outnumber those just described. The present study, however, has found little evidence to suggest that the "cooling out" of educational aspirations occurs on a large-scale basis at U.C.C. or the other community colleges in this study.

The question is thus raised as to whether Clark and London's case studies were atypical or whether the present study is itself not representative of the "typical" community college. It is important to

note some of the factors which have likely influenced the findings described herein. First nearly 30 years have elapsed since Clark undertook his field work and it has been over a decade since London made his observations at C.C.C. This period of time has seen a marked change in the socioeconomic background of community college students as sources of financial aid have dwindled. Major changes have also occurred in the demographic characteristics of the student body. Furthermore, the community colleges in this sample had each been operating for at least a decade; most of them far longer than that. The established nature of these colleges and their organizational climates has undoubtedly had an influence on the findings.

It is also important to note that, although the colleges in this sample are located in areas that are technically classified as urban, none of them are in major metropolitan cities. Each of the host counties is characterized by a blend of rural and more modestly populated areas. Both Clark and London's field sites were in major metropolitan cities, making it likely that the character of the student body and staff was shaped by this environment.

Ultimately we must be reminded that it may be impossible as well as unprofitable to attempt to define what the "typical" community college looks like. The results of the present study must be viewed in their Upstate New York context. Although the comparative work does suggest that the results may be generalizable to other Upstate New York community colleges, it would be dangerous to generalize beyond that level.

Faculty and Staff

Numerous attempts have been made to identify fruitful faculty typologies, including those proposed by Brawer (1968), McKeefery (1959), and Clark (1963). These efforts grow out of the belief that careers and occupations are the source of much of our personal adult identity. The faculty and staff of community colleges bring with them a sense of identity which is unfolded, reshaped or maintained as their perceptions of self vis-a-vis the institution take shape.

The makings of an "organizational saga" at Upstate Community College have grown out of the collective beliefs of the faculty and staff. Clark (1972: 179-180) maintained that organizational sagas grow out of shared experience and unified beliefs that are (1) rooted in history, (2) claim unique accomplishment, and (3) are held with sentiment by the group. They may develop in a fledgling organization, in a decaying organization or in an established organization which, despite the absence of crisis or decline, is ready for change.

The faculty and staff at U.C.C. on the whole identify strongly with the college and with the notion of service to the students and community. There is a sense that, despite the absence of stable strong leadership at the top, the larger goal of maintaining a progressive comprehensive community-based college is being met.

A variety of personal, cultural and structural factors appear to interact to produce the general evaluations reported by the faculty and staff. First, several of the individual divisions and departments within which faculty and staff are embedded have developed a sense of autonomy and purpose based in their respective disciplines. Coupled with the larger organizational saga which suggests that they are part

of an important, egalitarian institution, ties to their individual disciplines serve as an additional or alternative source of unity.

It is especially important that loyalty to U.C.C. can be fostered in either or both ways due to variations among individuals across time in terms of their commitment to the organization as a whole or to their colleagues within their substantive discipline. As an organization weathers storms that relate to administrative turnover or problematic relationships with external constituents, members must be able to mai[illegible] a sense of purpose. Likewise, if personality or other disruptions within a department or division cause a temporary loss of cohesiveness, a strong overall organizational identity may help retain member loyalty.

A second factor which has a significant impact on faculty and staff evaluations of their community college experience is the definition of U.C.C. as a teaching institution with a concomitant emphasis on a student-centered approach. A majority of the faculty and staff describe a large portion of their personal identities as being linked with helping others to learn and to master the system of higher education. Tied in with this strong personal identification are sources of great pride and frustration. Close mentoring and relationships with marked student progress and maturation are balanced by the frustration of other relationships which are less than successful or personally rewarding. The personal and professional values which brought them to the community college are reinforced through organizational values expressed in the structure of daily operations and in the system of evaluation.

Finally, the general satisfaction that many of the faculty and staff expressed is tied to their belief that U.C.C. represents a middle ground where their personal and professional lives may be balanced. The opportunity to work with students, the freedom of academia, and the relative prestige associated with college-level teaching were all cited as highly attractive features of their jobs. Likewise, the absence of pressures to publish, to compete for research monies, or to adopt an impersonal lecture format due to huge classes were cited as important factors behind their satisfaction.

Herzberg et al. (1959) postulated in their "two-factor theory" that job satisfaction arises from the content of work whereas dissatisfaction is tied more closely to the environment surrounding the worker. Indeed, faculty and staff respondents at U.C.C. view their classroom experience, interactions with students, opportunities for mentoring, and supportive relationships with colleagues as the major sources of satisfaction. Similarly, their dissatisfaction appears to arise from those areas which detract from their personal identification with the role of teacher or student advocate, including instability in the administration, an inadequate physical plant, low salaries and work loads which place constraints on relationships with students and opportunities for professional development.

Bushnell (1973) and Cohen and Brawer (1982) cite evidence that a shift occurred in community college faculty members' perceptions of their roles and working conditions during the mid-1970s. Bushnell reported that "80 percent of the faculty expected to be teaching in a community college five years from the date of his report (1973), and 78 percent of the CSCC's (Center for Study of Community Colleges)

respondents said that "doing what I'm doing now" in five years would be quite attractive. In fact, that statement was the most popular of nine choices, including 'faculty position at a four-year college or university'" (in Cohen and Brawer 1982: 84).

It is quite likely that the extensive development of systems of community colleges across the nation over the past 30 years has changed the way faculty and staff feel about their positions. With the majority of first-time, full-time and many more part-time students now starting their education in the community college, comparatively few individuals in our society can claim unfamiliarity with the community college. Likewise a somewhat more integrated vision of the community college, albeit one that is still not completely unified, has emerged during this period.

Despite identifiable areas of concern, the faculty and staff at U.C.C., on average, appear to be generally satisfied with their jobs and have no plans for career changes in their immediate or foreseeable futures. A collective sentiment has developed that their role is important in the lives of individuals and that U.C.C. plays a significant role in the community as well. The question remains as to whether this sentiment will be enough to hold together the institution as it faces the demands associated with changing demographics and as it struggles to secure an integrated, stable administrative core and a vision of its future.

Future Research

The present study sought to provide an in-depth account of the cultural and structural interrelationships played out between the

actors and organization in one Upstate New York community college. Furthermore, it sought to make the findings more broad-based and generalizable by including students, faculty and staff (including upper levels of administration) in the sample as well as by conducting comparative work at additional Upstate New York community colleges.

This study adds to the handful of ethnographic studies which have recently provided a great deal of insight into the workings of community colleges. However, as was the original intention behind this research effort, more questions were raised than have been answered. Like Karabel (1960), however, I have a firm belief that continued efforts in this genre of research will provide a fruitful basis upon which accounts of the observed patterns of human activity may be built. Thus the first order of future research should be to expand upon the single case-study approach through more comparative work within state systems followed by inter-state comparisons.

Aldrich (1979) and Hannan and Freeman (1977) have long espoused the merits of historical and longitudinal analysis of organizations at the population level. Their conceptualization of organizational forms provides a potentially exciting way of looking at the sociohistorical emergence of two-year and community colleges within the larger population of educational organizations. Population ecologists seek to understand the origins of organizational diversity and as a result, they are concerned with the shared attributes which distinguish organizational forms. Much of the literature on two-year colleges has suffered from a failure to examine the distinctions within this amorphous category that relate to their goals, boundaries and activities.

Similarly much of the literature on higher education in general treats four-year colleges as if the public/private or college/university dimensions were sufficient and meaningful distinctions. Few authors have attempted to examine the extent to which social processes, such as the cooling-out function, exist at all levels of higher education (and certainly well before that). Do some state colleges "look" more like community colleges in this sense and, conversely, have some community colleges adopted structures which make "cooling out" less prevalent?

As the past metaphors of organization as machine and organization as organism have been supplanted by theories stressing the importance of organizations' environments, resources and cultures, great strides have been made toward achieving a broader understanding of much of contemporary human life within organizations. Studies of two-year, community and other types of educational institutions must show greater concern for the ecological context within which they are located. For example, how does the presence or absence of a variety of educational alternatives (e.g., four-year research university, community college vocational center, and/or four-year teaching college) within a locality affect the social, racial, and academic composition of each institution's student body? How great an influence does the presence of a variety of nearby four-year institutions have on the transfer rate of community colleges? What influence does the composition of an area's corporate organizations have on curricular offerings and employment opportunities? Likewise, how does a rural versus urban setting affect the culture of the college?

Smircich (1985) and London (1986) have respectively called for the integration of psychodynamic formulations in analyses of organizational cultures in general and community colleges in particular. Individual's motives, perceptions and interpretations of the symbolic world around them are what make the understanding of social behavior at once both difficult, frustrating, and inexact and equally challenging, exciting, and rewarding. When either the individual or the social structural forces which surround him or her are viewed in isolation, the result is a one-dimensional perspective on what is in reality a far more dynamic relationship.

Accompanying these broader goals for future research should be an effort to clarify and refine transfer research. Currently, meaningful research on transfer issues is stymied by the lack of a coherent and consistent definition of what the term "transfer" actually means. Institutions vary tremendously on their definitions of what constitutes transfer into or out of their college and more importantly, on how they classify student records and data reports. Community college students have shown marked trends toward using the institution in what are considered "nontraditional" ways, but the question has to be asked, Whose tradition? The model of attending college on a full-time basis in sequential semesters until graduation simply does not "fit" the community college.

Probably more so than in any other area, research on transfer issues must employ solid longitudinal data. Questions of how to classify the student who takes 12 credit hours in his senior year of high school, or the private university student who "uses" the community college during summer vacations to graduate a year early, or the

student who after two semesters at the community college drops out and works five years before electing to go on to another college or, more recently, the reverse-transfer student who has a bachelor's degree from a four-year school attending the community college to acquire skills--these and numerous other real examples point out the difficult task of categorizing community college students. The transfer issue is just one part of a larger need to clarify and unify terminology and data bases so that conclusions may be drawn with greater credibility.

The results of this study suggest that mentoring relationships may represent important phenomena in the community college for faculty and students alike. Further research is needed to uncover the prevalence of such relationships and the possible influence of personality and institutional variables on their character and duration. One could ask if there is a correlation between having a mentoring relationship and "warming up" or raising one's aspirations. Does having a mentor raise retention rates among mature students or minorities? Does being a mentor relate to job satisfaction among the faculty? Answers to these and a variety of related questions could have major implications for support services for both faculty and students.

A final area which I feel will yield important discoveries about community college students is the study of student subcultures and subgroups. It is necessary to distinguish between categories that are meaningful to students based on social relationships and those that are meaningful only to administrators or researchers. Clark and Trow (1966) identified college peer groups or subcultures of which there are probably some remnants left today, even if their original form has changed with time. I would add that, in addition to such subcultures,

mature students, high-ability students, minority students, and the "elite" (Neumann and Riesman 1980) students who successfully transfer to selective four-year institutions should be among the groups brought under careful examination in future research.

Research on two-year and community colleges has often suffered from the imposition of elitist and inappropriate models originating from the research university or alternatively, less than objective analyses from within. As a critical component of higher education, the future of the community college can only be strengthened through continual objective efforts to uncover the meaning that it holds for its participants and through a critical examination of the opportunities and outcomes associated with the community college experience.

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